DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 185 574 CS 205 492

AUTHOR Kaufman, Betsy B.
TITLE Reading Strategies for College Students.
PUB DATE Mar 80
NOTE 9p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (31st, Washington, DC, March 13-15, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; *Critical Reading; Higher Education; Observation; *Reading Comprehension; *Reading Instruction; *Teacher Education; Teaching Methods; Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

College students need experiences in reading and reacting to good writing if they are to learn to read effectively. Observing and reacting is an important skill that encompasses many of the skills effective readers employ such as paraphrasing, understanding the structure of a piece of literature, noting the use of generalizations and specifics, and examining language and how language is used to create a tone and convey images, humor, and a sense of the speaker. A useful class technique is to ask each student to write observations of what he or she remembers from a particular piece of writing. After writing and then reading each observation, each student writes an observation about what the others have written. This exercise increases the student's skills in listening and broadens the scope of the student's next observation. One of the problems in college reading instruction is the way in which college reading instructors are prepared. Too few have had courses emphasizing the reading processes of the mature reader. Too many college reading instructors rely on workbooks with multiple choice answers as a method for teaching reading--a method that requires the readers to worry about the workbook author's answer, rather than developing an image of themselves as readers, reactors, and opinion formers. (MKM)

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READING STRATEGIES FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS --- CCCC

We may be ashamed; we may cry out against the injustice, but it is a fact of life: many of our college students enter college ill prepared to cope with the demands of reading college materials. When we test and find an underprepared student, we place that student in a reading course which we hope will prepare him or her for the reading demands of academic life. But often the course does not prepare these students for reading the kinds of materials that they will have to read in the way in which they should read at the college level. The problem stems from inadequate prior preparation for students and equally inadequate training of instructors.

Students need reading experience if they are to learn to read effectively. These experiences have to serve as paradigms for the kind of reading they will do when they are not in a reading class or laboratory. Asking students to read short passages in a workbook and choose one answer from a list of possible "distractors" is not giving the student a real reading experience, unless we think that reading consists of looking at short selections, identifying the main idea, supporting details, making inferences, guessing vocabulary definitions, reading selections in a mandated time period, and performing these feats by looking at a group of short answers and selecting the right one out of four. We all know this is ridiculous. The process described is at best a guessing game---psych-out-the-right-answer--but in reality it is worse than that, for it changes what might be and should be in active intellectual pursuit into a passive one, passive because the student merely receives information without thinking about it, passive because the student chooses from among distractors--distractors, that's what ETS and other test makers call them--I can never get over that term. The word is a sure indication that objective questions

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are designed to distract the student from the right answer, and, as they choose from among these answers, the student remains intellectually stifled because the student is forced to think only as the answer maker thinks, not with the authority of his or her own intelligence. In other words, workbooks which rely on a set of right and wrong answers force students into a form of standardized thinking that is as deadly as the world of Orwell's 1984. And the only use for this kind of exercise is to teach students how to perform on standardized tests--a useful expertise for that one task, but one that is least worthy of classroom time and effort.

College students need to think about what they read as much as they think about what they write. They need to question and compare information. But since they have not had experience in the techniques of questioning and comparing, of analyzing and observing, we have to provide them with opportunities to do this. As with all new learning, it is best to start with something that the student can readily grasp. We begin with the students' own writing.

Beginning with the students writing, we insure that the reader will know the subject and will be interested in what has been said. Our students write for themselves, for each other, for the instructor, and then they read what they have written out loud to the group. Student, teacher, tutors, team teachers, everyone in the room writes, and each writer, knowing that there is an audience for his or her work, writes for that audience, making what is written as interesting as he or she can. Sometimes we free write; sometimes we write fables, and eventually we write about our reading.

For example, in one reading class I taught last year, I followed a pattern I learned from one of my colleagues in the English Department, Marie Ponsot. We were reading Lewis Thomas' The Lives of a Cell. Thomas, a biologist who happens to be the chief of the Rockefeller Institute, is

also a philosopher. He writes about the unity of the universe, the interconnectedness of all living things. Students in his class were asked to read the first few essays in the collection. In class, we read the first essay out loud. Then we broke the class into small groups. Each person in each group was given ten minutes to write everything that they could observe about the piece, not what they thought, not what they liked, everything they could remember, everything they had noticed about what Thomas had said. The first observations they wrote were short and literal. These examples are typical: "the earth is like a cell," "the problem with modern man is that he tries to detach himself from nature," "man thinks he is above the rest of life, but he is not." Although the vocabulary is often difficult and technical--DNA, symbiont, genomes, diversity, uniformity, etc.--students do not mention vocabulary the first time they write observations. Why? I thought about that question for a long time. They don't because they have been taught not to admit that they don't understand something. They have been taught that to ask a question is a sign of stupidity. They have been taught that if you are told the definition of a word, you may be held responsible for remembering it on a test or that if you don't know a definition, you will be told to look the word up in a dictionary. Each of these responses hampers learning. Each has to be unlearned and learned again differently . We have to break the tradition of teaching students that they are expected to know all the answers and teach them that it is acceptable to say, "I don't know; I don't understand; I need some help." After all, if they really knew all the answers, we would not be necessary; we could look for other employment. Asking questions is an important step in self-education.

How do we encourage students to ask questions? Again, using the Thomas example, if a student doesn't mention the vocabulary, the teacher can include mention of it in his or her own observation. The teacher might write, "I noticed that some of the vocabulary in the essay was unfamiliar. I had to

look in the dictionary fo find answers about the meanings of words such as, genome, symbiont, DNA. I learned that this is technical vocabulary familiar to biologists." The students note that the teacher asks questions, uses a dictionary, and that observations can include noting the vocabulary of a piece.

In the early observations, students usually don't notice the structure of the essay. Again, the instructor can serve as a model, writing something about the structure. "I noticed that Thomas begins with a general statement. 'we are told that the trouble with Modern Man is that he has been trying to detach himself from nature.' In the next sentence, Thomas describes man in more specific terms, '...he sits in the topmost tiers of polymer, glass, and steel, dangling his pulsing legs, surveying at a distance the writhing life of the planet.' And getting more specific, he cites 'items,' examples of biological phenomona which show that man, the body of man, could not maintain its own life without the existance of smaller, symbiotic creatures which live in our cells!' Through this kind of observation, we begin to show students that they can look beyond the mere acceptance of information and move into an analysis of what they read--they can distinguish between general and specific, fact and inference, observation and judgement. It is an exciting moment when students begin to do this on their own. It comes after two or three observations, sometimes even more.

After writing and then reading each observation, each student writes an observation about what the others have written. This exercise increases the student's skill in listening and broadens the scope of the student's next observation. For, when students hear something in the observation of a peer that they did not notice before, something that they think is interesting and worthy of comment, they will look at the piece in a new way and, in future observations, will consider this as a way to examine each piece. In addition to sharpening the ear and learning more sophisticated ways to observe by

listening to each other, students learn to attend to the differences between observation and inference. Cries of, "You made an inference when you said that Thomas said that we should work together," can be heard from one group, or, "You were making a judgement when you said that you didn't like that essay," can be overheard from another.

Observing is an important skill which encompasses many of the skills effective readers employ: paraphrasing, understanding the structure of a piece of literature, noting the use of generalizations and specifics, examining language and how language is used to create a tone and convey images, humor, and a sense of the speaker. All of these can be learned and practiced through observation. Each is the domain of an effective reader.

But, in order to teach in this manner, we have to be willing to change what happens in the classroom. We have to move the locus of authority from the instructor to the students. We have to encourage students to believe in their own intelligence, and we must join them in that belief. We must provide them with constant and persistent opportunity to read, respond through writing, time to read their own words, and respond to what they have written in the same way we respond to the work of published authors. We have to take their work seriously.

To do this,we must change the way in which we prepare college reading instructors. We cannot continue the practice of professional neglect that now exists in the training of college reading instructors. Most of them were not trained for the teaching of reading at the college level. They hold graduate degrees from schools of education. But, when you examine the catalogues of colleges that offer degrees in teaching, you will note that these schools apparently regard the teaching of reading as the domain of the elementary and secondary schools. There are plenty of courses listed in the catalogue that teach teachers how to teach reading in elementary and secondary schools, but I have yet to find a course addressed to the teaching of reading at the college level.

This is a mistake.

It is a mistake because reading at the college level requires responding to print in a manner that is different from the way elementary or secondary students are expected to respond. Stephen Judy in The ABC's of Literacy puts it nicely.

> "Can the child read?" is equally elusive, for "reading," like "writing," is a term that has many meanings. To some it represents the ability to translate symbols into sounds (reading aloud); to others, it is the ability to retell the contents of a passage (comprehension). For many years, those two concepts dominated the reading curriculum. More recently, however, research has shown that reading is vastly more complex than imagined. Good readers do not read every single word on the page; they skip and jump, picking up words and contextual clues. Good readers do not passively absorb the fixed content of a printed page; they blend the message with their own experience to create new and unique meanings. Little wonder then that assessing reading skills defies easy measurement.

As far as it goes, Stephen Judy's description is accurate. At the elementary level, students are known to be beginning readers. It is accepted that the elementary school child has to learn to decode letters, to recognize familiar words, to put these words together as part of a sentence that will convey information. The process is active in that the child has to translate the marks on the page into something that makes sense orally. It is passive in that the child is asked only to receive information, not to think about it or the manner in which it is presented.

At the secondary level, the process continues and becomes more sophisticated. Students are expected to be able to read words and receive information from the print on the page. They are expected to begin to note variations in tone, to distinguish between fact and fancy, to recognize the difference between literal and figurative meaning. They may have been able to do these things at the elementary level, but the response was unconscious. By the time they are reading on their own on the secondary level, they should be able to think about what they have read and verbalize their responses. But sometimes students do not seem ready for this more sophisticated process. They do not perform well on standardized tests. They do not express themselves effectively when asked to

read or respond to their reading in class. When this is noted, more often than not, the student is placed in a special class and labelled a "remedial reader." The student is sent to a reading specialist who diagnoses the student's reading problem and remedies it. This too is a mistake. For, once identified as being in need of a "cure," the student, like a patient who sees a doctor seeking a cure for an illness, relies on the reading teacher to do the work. The student sees him or herself as a passive recipient and cannot take action to effect his or her own "cure." And the cure is often more deadly than the disease: pre-packaged, short answer drills, vocabulary lists, and study skills. Progress is measured in terms of grade level scores on objective tests, not on the way in which students use the materials they read to enhance their thinking about the world and their place in it.

For students who did not learn to read effectively in elementary or secondary school, the pattern continues in college. Reading teachers emphasize methods of reading rather than the act itself. Instructors use exercises to teach skills rather than allowing the skills to develop as the students work with real materials. It seems as if instructors are afraid to assign whole books and that short passages or workbooks are more comfortable for them to teach with. When I first discovered this pattern, I asked some of my colleagues why they didn't use college texts to teach college reading. The answer was, " What text can I use? After all, I was an elementary school major. If I had studied biology or English as a major, I would be able to use a text from one of those disciplines." It is hard to believe, and it is shameful to think that we have neglected the teaching of teachers, that if in fact we have taught our teachers anything at all, we have taught them to feel insecure about their knowledge and intellect--their ability to deal with ideas. How can teachers teach students to risk learning on their own if they themselves are afraid? Reading is not a discipline; it is a skill that people must acquire if they are to become educated. There is no book of laws that prohibits anyone from reading anything. The only prohibitions

in reading are lack of skill and motivation. Why shouldn't reading teachers read with their students? Why shouldn't they tackle textbooks, enjoy poetry, analyze essays. If they feel confident in their own ability to read, to understand what they are reading, they will risk reading materials other than reading texts and assign their students to read materials that open new vistas and encourage thinking. In order to create teachers who will do this, we have to change the way in which we train teachers. We will have to stop pretending that reading is a discipline. I was amazed recently when a colleague of mine in the English Department told me that he would not enjoy teaching reading. I asked him whether all the courses that he taught were composition courses. He said, "of course not.: "But, " I responded, "if you don't teach composition, what else do you teach?" "Literature," he answered. "But when you teach literature, aren't you teaching reading?" "They are not the same thing," he explained. My answer to that is that they are the same thing. Reading is part of the study of literature, just as it is a part of the study of mathematics, history and physics. The problem is that we separate literature and reading. Reading is a process we use to understand literature. One cannot exist without the other, and we have to train teachers to recognize this.

We have to reeducate both teachers and students to understand, accept and employ the relationship of reading and writing and apply the principals of that wonderful combination to their work in college. For through keen and thoughtful observation we learn to accept and analyze the ideas of others and appreciate and expand upon our own thoughts.